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A NOTE ON AESTHETICS

By ROBERT H. LOWIE

WHILE attempting to determine the artistic style of Crow parfleches as compared with that of other Plains tribes, I hit upon the notion that it might be desirable to apply some of the methods in vogue in experimental aesthetics. Circumstances prevented me from carrying these inquiries very far. Nevertheless, I feel it may be worth while to record my measurements in the hope that they may stimulate others to make corresponding observations on a larger scale and particularly to undertake relevant investigations in the field.

Gustav Theodor Fechner, the founder of aesthetics as a branch of exact psychology, endeavored to determine what forms of a particular geometrical category were deemed most pleasing. For this purpose he employed three methods,—that of having his subjects choose from a series of, say, rectangles the most aesthetic samples; that of having them construct the desired forms; and that of noting objectively what forms predominated in actual use. Since the decoration of parfleches consists for by far the greatest number of instances of simple geometrical figures, it seems to present an excellent opportunity for applying Fechner's principles, though in the study of museum material the first two of his methods are of course excluded.¹

Inquiries of this sort have an ethnographic no less than a psychological interest. A priori it is indeed possible to assume that in respect of the simpler geometrical figures a single aesthetic norm is common to all mankind,—say, the principle of the "golden cut" examined by Fechner, according to which the ideal rectangle has sides bearing to each other the ratio of $1 \pm \sqrt{5}$ to 2, the lesser

¹ Those interested may be referred to G. T. Fechner, *Vorschule der Aesthetik* (Leipzig, 1876) and Ch. Lalo, *L'esthétique expérimentale* (Paris, 1908).

having a length approximately 61.8 per cent of the greater. But it is far more reasonable to expect certain differences in the aesthetic canons accepted in different regions. And if this anticipation were verified, we should have an additional set of features for differentiating cultures. What is more, by pursuing such studies it becomes possible to define existing differences with greater nicety: instead of contenting ourselves with the remark that one region favors an angular and the other a curvilinear style of decoration we may succeed in determining objectively that one tribe prefers a rectangle of one type, a neighboring tribe a rectangle of another type.

But the matter is not quite so simple as this formulation might suggest. After one has handled a fairly large number of specimens from a single group it becomes clear that the preferences are not clear-cut and absolute. For example, we cannot say that the Crow use, say, isosceles triangles for the simple reason that even the same bag may be painted with right-angled as well as isosceles triangles; and the latter again may vary enormously in their aesthetic character according to the angle enclosed by the equal sides. It appears that the aesthetic value of a simple form is affected by its position in the decorative field: what is proper in a marginal area may be taboo in the middle, and so forth.

In order to avoid the pitfalls just hinted at I decided to compare the parfleches of the Shoshoni with those of the Crow as regards a single figure in the same position, to wit, the rectangle in the center of the decorative area. The central rectangle has been rightly noted as a trait characteristic of the Shoshoni parfleche, though it is by no means found on all Shoshoni specimens.¹ This feature is to some extent shared by the Crow. That it has a single origin historically cannot be doubted considering the geographical position of the tribes concerned and the lack of this motive on the parfleches of most other tribes. The question, then, is whether the borrowing tribe has transmuted the borrowed feature in consonance with its own aesthetic predilections and wherein such modifications consist.

¹ A. L. Kroeber, "Ethnology of the Gros Ventre," *Anthropological Papers, American Museum of Natural History*, vol. I, p. 172 (1908).

So far as I know, the two flaps of a parfleche invariably bear the same ornamentation and it is plausible to assume that they are meant to be identical. But whatever may be the artist's ideal, she frequently departs from it as regards the dimensions of her figures. In some instances, indeed, the discrepancies proved decidedly startling. I also found that the parallel lines of the same rectangle were not always equal in length but sometimes varied in appreciable measure. Accordingly, in establishing my ratios I measured all the sides and averaged those determining the same dimension. Since in the majority of cases there is a frame round the central figure, this provided an additional rectangle for each flap, so that the number of ratios for any one parfleche is usually four. The shrinking of the rawhide and the partial obliteration of some of the lines make exact measurement difficult in some of the specimens, but of course the minor inaccuracies due to these causes are negligible for present purposes. Only in one case were certain lines so completely effaced that measurement was impossible.

In the following tables the fractions designate the specimens as registered in the catalogues of the American Museum of Natural History. The absolute measurements are given in millimeters, those relating to the parallel sides of the same rectangle being paired.

It would of course be vain to draw any far-reaching conclusions from the small number of cases available for comparison. If I venture to broach the subject, it is because it provides a valuable method for field-workers, which I hope they will not neglect. It is not always practicable to purchase large series of museum specimens, but few natives would object to having the figures on their rawhide bags (or other objects bearing designs) measured by an ethnological visitor. I certainly feel confident that had I been alive to this mode of research at the proper time I could have secured an imposing array of data on Crow parfleches that would have definitely decided the closeness of their kinship with those of the Shoshoni.

I will assume that the samples of ratios supplied by my two

SHOSHONI

Specimen	Width	Length	Ratios
<u>50.1</u> 883	97,98 88,89	138,139 136,138	69.3 65.4
<u>50.1</u> 1166	202,197 172,160 210,200 172,183	303,300 269,270 299,295 263,267	66.2 61.5 69.0 66.8
<u>50</u> 2299	160,159 175,170 131,130 148,140	263,265 282,294 231,225 250,250	60.6 60.1 57.0 57.6
<u>50</u> 2346	161,150 124,114 153,145 95,100	210,205 183,176 191,196 160,161	74.9 67.0 67.2 60.6
<u>50</u> 2300	154,154 133,136 175,175 145,145	246,244 222,220 283,290 266,259	62.8 61.1 60.9 55.3
<u>50</u> 1179	175,173 183,180	208,204 190,200	84.4 93.3

CROW

Specimen	Width	Length	Ratios
<u>50</u> 6855	147,143 102, 97 149,148 111,108	245,249 206,207 222,221 180,182	58.7 48.3 67.1 60.7
<u>50</u> 1774	130,120 97,102 120,133 97,105	145,149 117,114 157,157 121,125	85.0 86.2 80.2 82.1
<u>50</u> 6846	112,124 90, 80 121,113 86, 78	224,228 190,189 217,223 177,181	52.2 44.7 53.2 45.8
1	8 8 7 6	12 14 9 11	66.6 57.1 77.7 54.5
1	10 9 8 8	17 17 13 15	58.8 52.9 61.4 53.3

¹ This specimen was photographed in the field and the proportions calculated from the negatives. Owing to the small size of the measurements obtained, differences between parallel lines are ignored here.

small series are typical and will collate the data in a table of distribution, uniting percentages by fives.

Ratios	Crow	Shoshoni
40-45	1	
45-50	2	
50-55	5	
55-60	3	3
60-65	2	7
65-70	2	6
70-75	0	1
75-80	1	1
80-85	3	1
85-90	1	0
90-95		1

The fact that the number of Crow cases above 80 is twice that of the Shoshoni is readily explained when we remember that the Crow piece in question has a framed rectangle while the excessively broad Shoshoni parfleche is frameless. Few as are the ratios, all the data consistently point in one direction,—a preference of the Shoshoni for relatively wide rectangles in the central position. The narrowest Crow rectangle is much narrower than the narrowest Shoshoni one; the broadest Shoshoni rectangle is broader than the broadest Crow rectangle; the Shoshoni prefer quite decidedly the ratio of from 60 to 70, the Crow the ratio of from 50 to 60. On the basis of these figures the Shoshoni norm would fall somewhat above and the Crow norm somewhat below Fechner's ideal rectangle.

I have already indicated that I attach to these findings a merely tentative and suggestive value. Of course comparison should not be restricted to rectangles in a particular position but must be extended to other forms, say, the diamonds or hour-glass figures that are so prominent in the rawhide decoration of Plains Indians. A comprehensive inquiry of this sort is bound to yield interesting results for it will be as important to ascertain that there is practical unity of aesthetic reaction to geometrical forms as to determine tribal differences.